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ABSTRACT

Results of a study of the relationship between female employment and reduced family size are reported. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether career involvement precedes the final family size decision or whether the family size decision precedes career involvement. Thirty-two voluntarily childless women constituted the sample. The women had initially intended to have children, but later postponed the decision because of a conflict with life style. The women were characterized as highly educated, involved in the labor force at upper occupational levels, and earning relatively high incomes (average: $11,000). Results indicate a high level of commitment to employment. Since the average age of marriage for the women, whose current ages range from 25 to 40, was 21.9, it is apparent that much of their career development had occurred after marriage. Thus, it appears that committed labor force involvement does influence fertility behavior. A conclusion is that if women find alternative sources of satisfaction outside the home, it is inevitable that these sources will compete with motherhood, given a person's limited supply of time and energy. (Author/KC)

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FEMALE EMPLOYMENT AND REDUCED FAMILY SIZE: SOME ADDITIONAL INSIGHT ON THE DIRECTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP*

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ABSTRACT

Do plans for participation in the labor force create a preference for a smaller family size or do initial family size intentions dictate the degree of commitment to employment activities outside the home? The primary objective of this study was to provide additional insight on the direction of this relationship. Thirty-two voluntarily childless "postponers" constituted the sample. They had intended to have children but later developed a life style that they did not wish to alter by having children. The data in this study confirm that that life style entailed a very high level of commitment to outside-the-home employment activities. Since the mean age at marriage for these working women, whose current ages ranged from 25 to 40, was 21.9, it is apparent that much of their career development, which included very high levels of education, had occurred after they were married. Therefore, it almost certainly was at least one motivating force that influenced them to change their minds about having children. Allowing for qualitatively important differences between these women and women whose fertility behavior falls within the lower limit of the dominant societal norm (two children) does not negate the likelihood that the direction of the relationship between rewarding employment and reduced family size is the same in both cases. In other words, there is no reason to believe that the causal order itself is altered by the magnitude of the reduction.

Female Employment and Reduced Family Size:

Some Additional Insight on the Direction of the Relationship

There is a question that has been raised time and again by social scientists. It pertains to the direction of the relationship between female employment and reduced family size. Do plans for participation in the labor force create a preference for a smaller family size or do initial family size intentions dictate the degree of commitment to employment activities outside the home? Perhaps this quandary was best summarized by Piepmeier and Adkins (1973:518):

> The recommendation of more specific policies to encourage fertility reduction through education and employment of women is not possible without a fuller understanding of the relationship between these factors and reproductive behavior. Deliberate policies which are based on changing a particular variable, such as employment of women, in order to bring about a change in another variable, such as their fertility, cannot be formulated without an understanding of the direction of the relationship and the effects of other variables involved. (emphasis mine)

One study that attempted to shed some light on this causal link was conducted by Waite and Stolzenberg (1976). Examining simultaneous equation models of young women's fertility expectations and plans for future labor force participation, they found that the number of children a woman plans to bear has only a small effect on the probability that she plans to participate in the labor force when she is 35 years old. In contrast, however, their findings revealed that a woman's plans to participate in the labor force when she is 35 have a substantial effect on the total number of children she plans to bear in her lifetime.

A limitation of Waite and Stolzenberg's study is that the data were based on intended labor force participation and intended fertility rather than actual labor force participation and actual fertility. Later research that took this shortcoming into account was conducted by Smith-Lovin and Tickamyer (1978). Although their statistical model was similar to Waite and Stolzenberg's in that it examined a potentially reciprocal relationship between fertility and female labor force participation, their focus was on actual fertility and work behavior rather than fertility and work plans. Interestingly, their findings were just the reverse of what Waite and Stolzenberg had found. Smith-Lovin and Tickamyer concluded that the number of children a woman has may influence her work decisions but her labor force involvement does not alter her fertility behavior.

A potential problem with both of these studies is that they were based on nonrecursive statistical models which required that certain assumptions be made. Smith-Lovin and Tickamyer (1978) cautioned that the accuracy of the results in such studies is dependent upon the validity of the assumptions that are used to specify the statistical model. A related difficulty, specified by Waite and Stolzenberg (1976), is that it is possible that fertility and work plans (behavior) develop sequentially rather than simultaneously. If so, a simultaneous causation model would miss the step-wise nature of the relationship. Neither of the above studies had a sufficiently rich data base to allow a sequential model to be tested against a simultaneous causation model.

The major objective of this paper was to provide additional insight on the direction of causality between female employment and reduced family size. Voluntarily childless females were the focus of attention. There is an advantage in looking at an extreme family size such as childlessness in that it is

easier to isolate the direction of the relationship between labor force participation and reduced family size. Because they are aware that they are engaging in deviant behavior which will elicit negative pressures and sanctions (Houseknecht, 1974; 1977; 1978; Bram, 1974; Ory, 1976), voluntarily childless individuals can more precisely pinpoint the timing of their decision than can persons whose family size desires simply fluctuate within the dominant society's acceptable fertility range of 2-4 children. The retrospective information that they can provide permits a sequential or step-wise analysis that was not possible in the studies conducted by Waite and Stolzenberg (1976) and Smith-Lovin and Tickamyer (1978).

METHODOLOGY

Personal, in-depth interviews were conducted in 1977 with 51 currently-married women who reported themselves to be childless by choice. The women were located by means of a modified network approach. An initial list of names suggested by family planning clinics, hospitals, the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood, and various other persons in administrative positions was compiled.

Six criteria were used to determine (1) whether the childless state was voluntary and (2) whether there was a high degree of commitment to remain permanently childless. Both of these conditions had to be met before a particular individual could be accepted for participation in the study. Assessment required each woman to affirm that she had never borne a child nor adopted (nor intended to adopt) one and to state clearly that her childlessness was due to choice, not biological reasons. She also had to have been married for a minimum of five years if neither she nor her spouse had been voluntarily sterilized for contraceptive purposes. An additional

measure of commitment was an attitude certainty measure. Each woman had to answer, "very certain" or "fairly certain" that no children were desired in the future. These six criteria were strictly adhered to not only in the initial telephone screening but also later in the interview. Inconsistencies were not permitted.

In her exploratory study of voluntarily childless wives, Veevers (1973) suggested that there are two different types of people who remain voluntarily childless. One type expresses intentions to remain childless relatively early in life, even prior to marriage. The other type intends to have children at the time of marriage but arrives at a childless decision through a series of postponements as the woman develops a life style that she does not wish to give up. These two types have been referred to as early articulators and postponers, respectively (Houseknecht, 1974; 1977; 1979).

In the present study, it was found that 64% of the 51 married, childless women were postponers whereas only 36% were early articulators. It is interesting to note that these same proportions were also found in two earlier studies (Veevers, 1973; Bram, 1974). Postponement of childbearing after marriage, then, appears to be a more common route to childlessness than articulation of intentions before marriage.

The primary concern in this study was the direction of the relationship between female employment and reduced family size. Which comes first? An initial step in answering this question was to locate individuals who had lowered their family size desires and who had completed their fertility. It was earlier noted that a limitation of the Waite and Stolzenberg (1976) study was its focus on intended fertility and intended labor force participation. The problem with such an emphasis is that expectations (attitudes) change as one is exposed to new experiences (Sherif, 1976). This point is demonstrated

by the permanently childless postponers in the present study. It, therefore, is important to look at actual labor force participation and actual fertility.

The voluntarily childless "postponers" met the criterion of reduced family size as well as completed fertility. First, at the time of marriage, they had intended to have children but later had decided that children were not compatible with their preferred life style. Thus, they had "lowered" their family size desires. Furthermore, it can be argued that the childless "postponers" in this study had actually completed their childbearing. Evidence for this assertion is based in part on their strong degree of commitment to the childless life style as measured by the previously-stated selection criteria. In addition, Table 1 reveals that their mean age was 29.7 (median and modal ages were also 29) and that they had been married for an average of 7.8 years at the time of the interview. The longer a woman had been married without having children or wanting them would seem to indicate commitment to a childless life style (completed childbearing). In fact, in 31 per cent of the cases either the respondent or her husband had been sterilized for contraceptive purposes. The final sample, then, for this study consisted of 32 voluntarily childless "postponers."

Table 1 About Here

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented in Table 2 suggest that a high level of labor force participation characterized the childless females in this study. With one exception, all of the women were employed outside the home. Of those who were employed, 90 per cent were working full-time (35 or more hours per week).

With regard to occupational prestige, the majority of women in the sample (55%) were classified at the second highest occupational level. An additional 16% were at the third highest level which means that most of the women were either professionals, managers, administrators, or owners of businesses.

Looking at earnings, the average income of the childless women in 1976 was $11,000. Their median income was the same. This amount is approximately $3,280 higher than the 1976 median income of year-round, full-time female workers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977).

Table 2 About Here

Although these figures represent the status of the childless women at the time of the survey, it is clear that such high levels of occupation and income are generally associated with a long developmental training period. That this was the case for those women is indicated by their relatively high levels of education (Table 1). Seventy-five percent of them had had four or more years of college and, what's more, 50 per cent of them had one or more years of graduate training. Being highly educated, involved in the labor force at the upper occupational levels, and earning relatively high incomes are characteristics that have typified childless women in earlier studies. (Gustavus and Henley, 1971; Veevers, 1974; Bram, 1974; Ory, 1976).

The idea that it might not be employment per se but rather rewarding employment that is associated with reduced family size had been suggested by a number of writers Davis, 1967; Blake, 1969; Chilman, 1971; Fortney, 1972; Scanzoni and McMurry, 1972; Tangri, 1972; and Hoffman and Hoffman, 1973. That the women in this study found their work rewarding is indicated by the high level of work commitment that they expressed. For example, when asked in an open question what for them would best represent achievement or success,

50 per cent of the sample mentioned their vocational role. In response to being asked their major reason for engaging in employment outside the home, 78 per cent said that their motivation was either personal or a combination of personal/financial. Only 22 per cent reported that their major reason for working was solely financial. A final measure of work commitment involved asking the women about their current role and then about their role preference to see if there was a discrepancy between the two. It was felt that any discrepancy between actual role and preferred role in the direction of greater family involvement would be indicative of reduced occupational commitment. According to the results, 63% of the women felt that employment and marriage/family had equal importance in their lives and that was the way they preferred it.

It is important to note once again that at the time of marriage, the voluntarily childless "postponers" had planned to have children at some time in the future. During the course of their marriage, they developed a life style which they did not wish to alter by having children. The data in this study confirm that that life style entailed a very high level of commitment to outside-the-home employment activities. Since the mean age at marriage for these working women, whose current ages ranged from 25 to 40, was 21.9, it is apparent that much of their career development had occurred after they were married. Therefore, it almost certainly was at least one motivating force that influenced them to change their minds about having children.

In discussing the lower extreme of acceptable family size in the United States, Griffith (1973) referred to the sharp, bottom limit of two children. Thus, even though work-committed women might have smaller families,

what that generally means is a greater preponderance of two children rather than three or four (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). Allowing for qualitatively important differences between these women and women whose fertility behavior falls outside the lower limit of the dominant societal norm, for example the voluntarily childless (Houseknecht 1978), does not negate the likelihood that the direction of the relationship between rewarding employment and reduced family size is the same in both cases. In other words, there is no reason to believe that the causal order itself is altered by the magnitude of the reduction.

Increased educational and employment opportunities have enabled more and more women to participate in the academic and occupational worlds both before and after marriage. This situation combined with the postponement of childbearing phenomenon that became prevalent in the 1970's (Gibson, 1976) serves to provide time for women to become aware of the advantages of a reduced family size. If women do find alternative sources of satisfaction outside the home, such as employment, it is inevitable that they will compete with motherhood because every person has only a limited supply of time and energy. Illustrative of this conflict is a statement made by a mother who was involved in a career.

> For me, it is not easy to separate my priorities; I am two distinct people. I am a professional outside the home and when I am at home, that is 100% of my time and effort. For me to continue to be successful at both of these priorities represents achievement. However, I feel that I will never reach the point where I will be totally successful in both of them because they do overlap and I do feel torn between the two things.

Career involvement has been found to play a significant role in the decision to remain childless although alone, it was not found to be sufficient. It appears that reference group approval must also be available if a woman is, in fact, to remain childless (Houseknecht 1978). Since career involvement was not found to be sufficient, to say that most voluntarily childless women are career oriented does not imply the reverse -- that most career-oriented women want to remain childless. There is a very high value placed on having children in all sectors of this society and most women internalize this value. For these women, it is no longer a question of reference group approval for childlessness, because they have adopted the mother role as part of their self-image. Nevertheless, it makes sense that these women would desire a relatively small family size if they are going to combine motherhood and a career.

To conclude, the results of this study lend support to Waite and Stolzenberg's (1976) findings. In contrast to what Smith-Lovin and Tiemayer (1978) found, it appears that committed labor force involvement does influence fertility behavior. That is not to say that the act of "postponing" childbearing during the early years of marriage has no causal effect on level of career involvement. In fact, not having the responsibilities of child care would allow more time for such activity. Rather, the point here is that career involvement still precedes the "final family size decision" as evidenced by the fact that the number contemplated during the postponement stage may be considerably altered at this point.

It is important to point out that although there is widespread agreement on the importance of understanding the direction of the relationship between employment and reduced family size, none of the studies to date, including the present one, provides conclusive evidence. Rather, each piece of research provides one more bit of insight on a causal pattern which is exceedingly complex and virtually unresearched.

Table 1

Selected Social Characteristics of the "Postponers"

Characteristic	
Mean Age	29.7
Mean Age at Marriage	21.9
Mean Years Married	7.8
Education:	
Per cent high school graduates	9
Per cent 1 - 3 years of college	16
Per cent 4 years of college	25
Per cent 5 or more years of college	50
	N = 32

Table 2

Occupationally-Related Characteristics of the "Postponers"

Characteristic	
Per Cent in the Labor Force	97%
Full-time (90%)	
Part-time (10%)	
Income ($\bar{X}$ and median)	$11,000
Occupational Prestige level:*	
Higher Executives, Proprietors of large Concerns and major Professionals	0%
Business Managers, Proprietors of Medium-Sized Businesses, and lesser professionals	55%
Administrative Personnel, Small Independent Businesses and Minor Professionals	16%
Clerical and Sales Workers, Technicians, and Owners of Little Businesses	23%
Skilled Manual Employees	0%
Machine Operators and Semi-Skilled Employees	6%
Unskilled Employees	0%
	N = 31

*Based on the Occupation Scale of The Two Factor-Index of Social Position (Hollingshead, 1957).

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